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SERMON

PREACHED IN ST. SAVIOURGATE CHAPEL, YORK,

On Sunday June 25, 1826,

AND

ADDRESSED TO THE STUDENTS

OF

MANCHESTER COLLEGE.

BY WILLIAM SHEPHERD.

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1826.

SERMON.

Titus ii. 15.

"Let no man despise thee."

Titus, as you well know, was the confidential friend and the favourite disciple of the great Apostle of the Gentiles. He had accompanied his master to Jerusalem at the time when the first council of the christian teachers was held in that city. He afterwards attended Paul to Ephesus, and was associated with him in various other journeys, which, prompted by his characteristic zeal, he undertook, with a view of disseminating the principles of the christian doctrine. At the time, when the epistle whence my text is selected was addressed to him, he resided in Crete, whither he had been sent for the purpose of restraining the irregularities of certain professors of the new religion, who seemed disposed to abuse that liberty with which Christ had made them free, to the indulgence of their wayward humours and their licentious inclinations.

At this period the island of Crete was in a

most flourishing condition. Blest by nature with an exuberant fertility of soil, it contained within its precincts numerous cities, whose inhabitants were enriched by commerce, polished in their manners, adorned with literature, and versed in art.

From the tenor of Paul's epistle to his friend, we may conclude that the christian converts in that island presumed too much upon their wealth, and prided themselves too much upon their acquirements. The apostle was well aware of this circumstance; he was duly apprised of the state of the society in which the youthful missionary was situated; but with a full knowledge of all this, he regards the exterior qualities of the Cretans with honest indifference; he applies to them the never-failing touchstone of the principles of religion and virtue. He makes no provision for a capitulation, on the part of his pupil, with rank or riches. He calls upon him to maintain his dignity; he admonishes him to "preach with all boldness, to reprove with all authority,"—that is to say, with the authority derived from a consciousness of pure intentions and enlightened views; and sums up this head of his instructions in the emphatic phrase, "Let no man despise thee."

I shall avail myself of the privilege conceded to a seniority of many years—years not passed in inactivity, and during the course of which I have not been an inattentive observer of men and manners, in adopting these spirited words of the apostle; and shall say to such of my audience as are preparing themselves for the discharge of the duties of the gospel ministry amongst the protestant dissenters of this kingdom, and to such of them as are ready to enter upon these duties, "Let no man despise you."

And let not any one here present conceive that this is a hard requisition. Let no one imagine that it is a demand, a compliance with which does not mainly depend upon the exertions of those to whom it is, upon the present occasion, specially addressed.

It is true that, as a body, dissenting ministers are not endowed with that wealth which, in this kingdom, bestows upon its possessors the factitious importance which is vulgarly designated by that much abused and much prostituted term "respectability." We hold not by virtue of our office any superior rank in the community at large. We claim no authority over others beyond that of our indi-

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considered as degrading? Is there anything in its essence, is there anything in its nature when abstractedly considered, which is not venerable and dignified? I steadily maintain the negative. Let no one be surprised then if I again say to the youthful candidates for this office, "Let no man despise you."

And here let me remark, that if our office be in itself respectable, the circumstances of our entrance upon it are no less so. We assume not that office, in our particular situations, by virtue of the mandate of a patron, by the authority of an ecclesiastical superior, or by the right of rotation as conceded to the members of any seminary of academical instruction. Our respective congregations do not wait the will of others as to the nomination and appointment of their pastors. We are not forced upon reluctant flocks by the process of arbitary compulsion; nor do we make any peremptory demands upon them for our support and maintenance. We are elected by the free choice of those who delegate to us the office of conducting their public devotional exercises. It is impossible, therefore, that at the commencement of our ministerial labours we should not be regarded, at least by those who call us to the exercise of this function,

with respect and esteem. In the incidents of life it may, and it sometimes does happen, that individuals of questionable, and even of despicable character, may by special influence be inducted into some of the numerous livings appertaining to the established church; but it is next to impossible that any one who has so misconducted himself, or has so mispent his time, as to be held in contempt by the wise and good, should obtain a situation as a minister among the protestant dissenters.

From this fact is to be drawn an obvious conclusion well worthy of the attention of the aspirants after this office, namely, that it is their wisdom, as well as their duty, (wisdom indeed and duty are always strictly and inseparably united) to be solicitous above all things to maintain in its purity the recommendation of a blameless character. It did not escape the notice of that most sagacious of all observers of human conduct, the illustrious Dr. Franklin, that the particular circumstances of non-conformist ministers strongly urge them to virtuous behaviour. In every country the sects which separate themselves from the communion of the established religion, are watched with a vigilant, I am afraid I may say, with a jealous eye. The public

instructors of those sects are of course objects of particular attention. A consciousness of this should naturally lead them to guarded circumspection of conduct. We well know that in the estimation of the community at large we shall meet with little indulgence for our failings, that our errors will be magnified, and that transgressions of propriety which in others would be characterised as venial, in us will be regarded by the sharpened criticism of the public as serious offences. The sittings, too, of that tribunal before which we stand for judgment are permanent. We are constantly and directly amenable to public opinion. On that opinion our very existence, as ministers, mainly depends. If the verdict of that opinion is given against us, our usefulness is gone, and our function is virtually, if not formally, at an end.

I mention not these circumstances as hardships. I represent them not as matters of complaint. I merely propose them to my young friends as subjects of serious consideration, and as tending, so far as their influence reaches, to confirm and support those superior motives to the discharge of all the duties of righteousness and true holiness, which must suggest themselves to the minds

of those of them who duly meditate upon the nature of the function to which they profess an intention of dedicating themselves.

In this point of view let us further consider the obligations which are imposed upon us by the particular system of our opinions. We own no absolving power on earth which can remit to us the penalties of our transgressions. We profess no belief in the efficacy of those internal emotions which persuade the fanatic that his salvation is secure, notwithstanding he be sunk in the very depths of moral turpitude. We pretend not to atone for violations of the strictness of the moral law by the nicely poised balance or the hair-breadth accuracy of our creed. The chief topic of our preaching is "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before God." We hold with the apostle James, that "pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep ourselves unspotted from the world." Inexcusable then, indeed, shall we be if our conduct bring disgrace upon our profession, and bitter will be the contempt to which, in that case, we shall be exposed. The very proverbs of the obscurest village, will point out as a man to be despised the preacher of our persua-

sion who scandalously belies by his example the exhortations to virtue which he delivers within the walls of the sanctuary.

In applying these remarks to those of my auditors who are more particularly interested in them, I shall not be prompted by an overwheening anxiety to dilate at any considerable length. I have lately read with attention a list of the dissenting divines now settled in various parts of the kingdom who received the whole or a part of their academical education at the York College; and from my personal knowledge of many of them and from the reports which I receive of others, I am fully persuaded of the high respectability of their character. Truly they are men whom no one whose judgment is to be held in any estimation will despise. And this fact speaks volumes as to the good discipline of the institution in which they were bred; as to the vigilance of the tutors, and as to their sound discretion in the exercise of that authority with which they are necessarily and wisely invested. No divinity student, indeed, can be admitted into this institution without the production of testimonials to his character, which we may presume are not rashly and inconsiderately given. But even with this

preliminary advantage, and in a small community like this, it is a task by no means devoid of difficulty to notice the first tendencies to error, and irregularity, and to reclaim those who give token of thoughtlessness, by timely admonition and seasonable advice. I know that to the youthful mind, the rules of discipline occasionally appear harsh and rigid. The bit is galling to the mouth of the spirited steed. But after all, the rules of discipline must be enforced in every well ordered society; and the true way to comfort and to respectability also, to the individual who is subjected to these rules, is to submit to them cheerfully and with a good grace. And why should they not be thus submitted to? They were instituted for the benefit of those to whom their provisions are applied. They are calculated to produce amongst them the valuable habits of order, regularity, and decorum. They lay a restraint on the first tendencies to evil, and stand as vigilant sentinels at the gates of the temple of Virtue. Boldness in the infringement of them is no mark of spirit, except indeed it be of an evil spirit; and dexterity in their violation may evince ingenuity, but, believe me, it evinces no wisdom. Wisdom is evinced by a conduct befitting our years and our particular situation;

and deference to their elders, and a ready compliance with reasonable requisitions made on the part of their superiors and their benefactors, is the primary duty of youth. Every one, too, who voluntarily enters into any community either formally or virtually covenants to guide himself by those statutes and ordinances by which that community is regulated; and whosoever he may be that acts upon a contrary principle, he violates an honourable engagement. And is the individual who violates an honourable engagement to be regarded with respect? No, but with contempt. If, then, my young friends, you would fulfil the precept in the text, "Let no man despise thee," be punctual and scrupulous in complying with the rules and orders of the institution to which you belong. On reflection you will be convinced, that in any seminary of education whatsoever, those inmates are regarded with the greatest respect, who are modest in their demeanour, obedient to the prescriptions of law, courteous to their tutors, and exemplary for the general regularity of their conduct.

During your residence here, my young friends, under the inspection of your tutors, the maxims which I have thus laid down will

no doubt be enforced upon you by the steady, though gentle, hand of authority. But some of you are quitting the Collegiate walls for ever; and many of you for a long interval of time. In the less restrained intercourse, then, which you will soon have with society at large, allow me to recommend to you as the polar star for the guidance of your conduct the following principle, that no man is despised by the well judging, or even by the public in general, who conducts himself in a manner befitting the occupation upon which he is entering, or to which he is destined. This principle is true as applied to all the trades, crafts, and professions to which men devote themselves throughout the wide range of society; and we must have all observed the just ridicule and contempt which is heaped on those who violate it. What then is naturally expected from those who profess to devote themselves to the Christian Ministry? I answer, not only the essence of virtuous conduct, but also a guarded circumspection of behaviour, a decorum of manners, a simplicity and sincerity of conversation, and a general propriety of demeanour, which becomes those whose duty it is or soon will be to exhort others to avoid "all appearance of evil," whose contemplations should convince them of the vanity of

sublunary things, whose meditations on the awful certainties of futurity, may be justly expected to tinge their minds with a seriousness, which, real as it is, is yet by no means inconsistent with that placidity and even with that cheerfulness of disposition, with which those must be endowed who are conscious to themselves of pure zeal for the diffusion of the truth as it is in Jesus, and of an ardent wish for the promotion of the highest interests, and of the eternal welfare, of their fellow men.

I am the more induced to touch upon this topic, because in the experience of life, I have now and then observed some young men trained and in training for the christian ministry, who in their intercourse with society at large, have occasionally affected to throw off the divine, and to assume the manners of men of the world. But, believe me, this is a dangerous experiment. It is no part of wisdom to approach to the verge of those confines where propriety ends and impropriety begins. They who act thus put themselves into what is called, and very expressively called, "a false position." They heedlessly throw themselves into the way of temptation, and run an extreme hazard of falling into evil. At all events they expose themselves to censures which it

were wise in them to avoid. They appear as a kind of mongrels in society, who can have no just claim to reverence or esteem. Nothing is more contemptible than affectation. And in what does affectation consist? It consists in a man's wishing for a while to appear what he is not; and whether an individual sustains the part of the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, or of the worldly mannered divine, he cuts an awkward figure upon the stage of life, and will be despised by every one who makes a due estimate of human character. If he proceed, as in all probability he will, from levity to vice, his doom is sealed, he becomes an outcast from the association of the wise and good, and is soon regarded with contempt, even by those, who are for a time the companions of his vicious indulgences.

"To virtue," said the apostle Peter, "add knowledge." And in concurrence with his arrangement of christian qualifications, I would propose to my young friends, and indeed to all ministers of the gospel, the cultivating the intellectual powers as the next means of their avoiding being despised and of rising to respectability. In the present age, knowledge is in these kingdoms most widely diffused. The advantages of elementary education are much

more generally extended than they were in the times of our forefathers. That base prejudice which is persuaded that the peace of society is best secured by the involving of the general mass of the community in the darkness of ignorance is fast disappearing. Those who would fain wish to make science a monopoly of the rich and the great are giving up their cause in despair; and now limit their exertions to the perverting of that instruction, the diffusion of which they cannot hinder. The speedy communication with the capital, the consequence of our commercial enterprise, opens to the public at large throughout the kingdom, and that in great abundance, the means of literary information. The laity of that portion of the Dissenters from the establishment, to which we belong, were at an early period distinguished by their attainments in general knowledge, and they have made advances in knowledge in proportion to the increased facilities of acquiring instruction. If then a dissenting minister of our persuasion would wish to be held in that respectful estimation, in which, for his comfort it is necessary for him to be held, even by his own congregation, he must be anxious not to maintain a secondary rank, but if possible to take the lead in this march of mind. And surely, with

regard to you, my young friends, it may justly be asserted that you enter upon life with advantages, which if you neglect, you will deserve to be despised. The course of academical education in which you are trained is liberal and comprehensive. The extensive and flowery fields of ancient literature are opened to you, and you are exercised in the investigations of severer science. You are taught to trace the operations of the human mind, and to weigh in the balance of reason the variety of systems which profess to ascertain the grounds, the extent, and the limit of moral obligation. The sacred volume is unfolded to you, and you have been reminded that it is peculiarly incumbent upon you to make yourself acquainted with its contents, not through the medium of versions, of human glosses, creeds and confessions of faith, but by a reference to the original languages in which it is composed. What a rich and varied prospect is here submitted to your intellectual view! What a harvest is here presented, in the reaping of which to employ your mental energies! Let not these great, these distinguished advantages, be extended to you in vain. Seize the "glorious, golden opportunity" of storing your minds with varied knowledge. Trace the intricate paths of science with stea-

diness and perseverance. In this road, indeed, there is no standing still. If you do not advance you will retrograde. And, in reference to this topic of advice, I warn my junior friends against that deceitful mode of self-indulgence, desultory reading; which is in fact doing little under the specious appearance of doing a great deal, and which rapidly sinks the diligent student into the trifling *dilettante.* The course of study prescribed by the regulations of the College will demand the full exertion of your powers. The æra of flashiness and show and superficial acquirements is passed, and it is not by the pre-eminently wise and intelligent alone, but by the public at large, that a lounging scholar is held in slight regard. Among the various departments of solid study, then, which present themselves to your view, may I hope that you will fix upon some distinct and important subject to which you may direct your attention till you have made yourselves masters of it. This will lead you to that best promoter of the improvement of the intellectual faculties, regularity of exertion and definiteness of thinking. Excellence in any one important branch of intellectual pursuit ever redounds to him who has attained it. Believe me, a man who has thus distinguished himself will never be despised.

In the mean time I am well aware that profundity of science and elegance of scholarship are by no means indispensable requisites to the character of a useful minister of the gospel. We have witnessed in our own connexion, and that with the sincerest pleasure, genius and zeal happily surmounting the disadvantages incident to defects in early scholastic discipline. I would not profess myself a Christian if I were not persuaded that the Christian doctrine is so simple and intelligible as to admit of what our ancestors were wont to call the utmost "liberty of prophesying." But still we have all a conscious sense that if we can add to the solidity of religious knowledge the graces of mental accomplishments, our profession will thus be adorned. In looking into the annals of non-conformity do we not read with pride and pleasure of the learned labours of Lardner and Taylor and Farmer. Do we not admire the powers of imagination displayed by a Watts and a Scott; and though last not least in honour in this department of literary merit, the sublime conceptions and the fervid fancy, and the chastened playfulness of a Barbauld? Are we not pleased with the just taste of a Kippis, and with the happy union of learning, judgment, and wit, displayed in the works of Robinson? Do we

not survey with respectful wonder the varied labours of Priestley, whose gigantic intellect comprehended the universe in its grasp; and whilst it scanned the laws, which regulate the planetary system, analysed into its elements the subtle fluid with which all nature is penetrated, and detected in their combination, and traced to their origin, the still subtler principles that compose the human mind? Do we not, on account of their intellectual attainments, venerate the memory of an Aikin, an Enfield, a Walker, and a Holland? I call upon my young friends to emulate the example of these men, who both morally and intellectually were "lights of the world." Copy their virtues; imbibe their ardour in the pursuit of knowledge; and then you may rest assured that no man will despise you.

The aspect of the times admonishes those who dedicate themselves to the Unitarian Ministry to store their minds with the fruit of laborious study. We live in a state of perpetual warfare. We are ever and anon provoked to enter into the lists of controversy, and it is incumbent upon us to have our armour well buckled on and our swords sharpened for the combat. We are attacked on every hand. Our adversaries are multifarious,

from the puny whipster who is ambitious to shine in a College exercise, to the elegant scholar who wishes to fight his way to preferment in the lengthened series of gradations which exists in the orders of the established church. It behoves us then to be ever prepared to give a reason for the faith which we hold and to defend our common principles. And this cannot be done without that critical knowledge of language, and that minute acquaintance with the niceties of theological disquisition, the acquirement of which will demand days of patient study, and the stealing of hour after hour from night to be devoted to deep and laborious investigation. Think you, my young friends, that your worthy and revered Principal could have so well maintained the good fight which he lately fought in our common cause, had he dreamed away his early years in the specious indolence of desultory reading, or had he contented himself with skimming lightly over the surface of theological science? The friend of my youth, the associate of my academical studies will forgive me, if even in his presence I point him out to you as a pattern, in the fervent hope that when his days are numbered and his earthly labours are closed, upon some one of his pupils may descend his mantle, invested

with which, the new champion may stand forth, the virtuous, enlightened, and bold asserter of the truth as it is in Jesus.

I shall conclude by addressing myself to the candour of my young friends, entreating them to take in good part the didactic turn of this discourse. And this I do with the greater hope that this candour will be conceded to me, as having the testimony of my own conscience, that the sentiments which I have delivered are dictated by a profound and habitual respect for our common profession, and by an earnest zeal for the honour and welfare of a body, my connection with which has constituted one of the principal ingredients of the happiness of my life.

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